

North Somerset Fostering Strategy

September 2016-2018



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Executive Summary

Within North Somerset it is our ambition that all of our Children Looked After will be placed within safe, stable and loving foster families where they can thrive and maximise their potential. This document sets out North Somerset's two year strategic plan outlining how this will be achieved focusing on the areas of:-

- Foster carer recruitment and assessment
- Foster carer retention and support
- Placement stability
- Foster carer knowledge and skills
- Diversity of Foster Placements, Supporting Lodgings and Respite Carers
- Support for the mental health and emotional well-being of our Children Looked After and our foster carers

It is evident from analysis of current data in respect of our Children Looked After and foster carer population that we do not at this time have a sufficient or diverse enough pool of foster carers to meet the current and increasing demand. This means that currently it is challenging to ensure good placement matching for our Children Looked After which can be a contributory factor in placement disruption and breakdown.

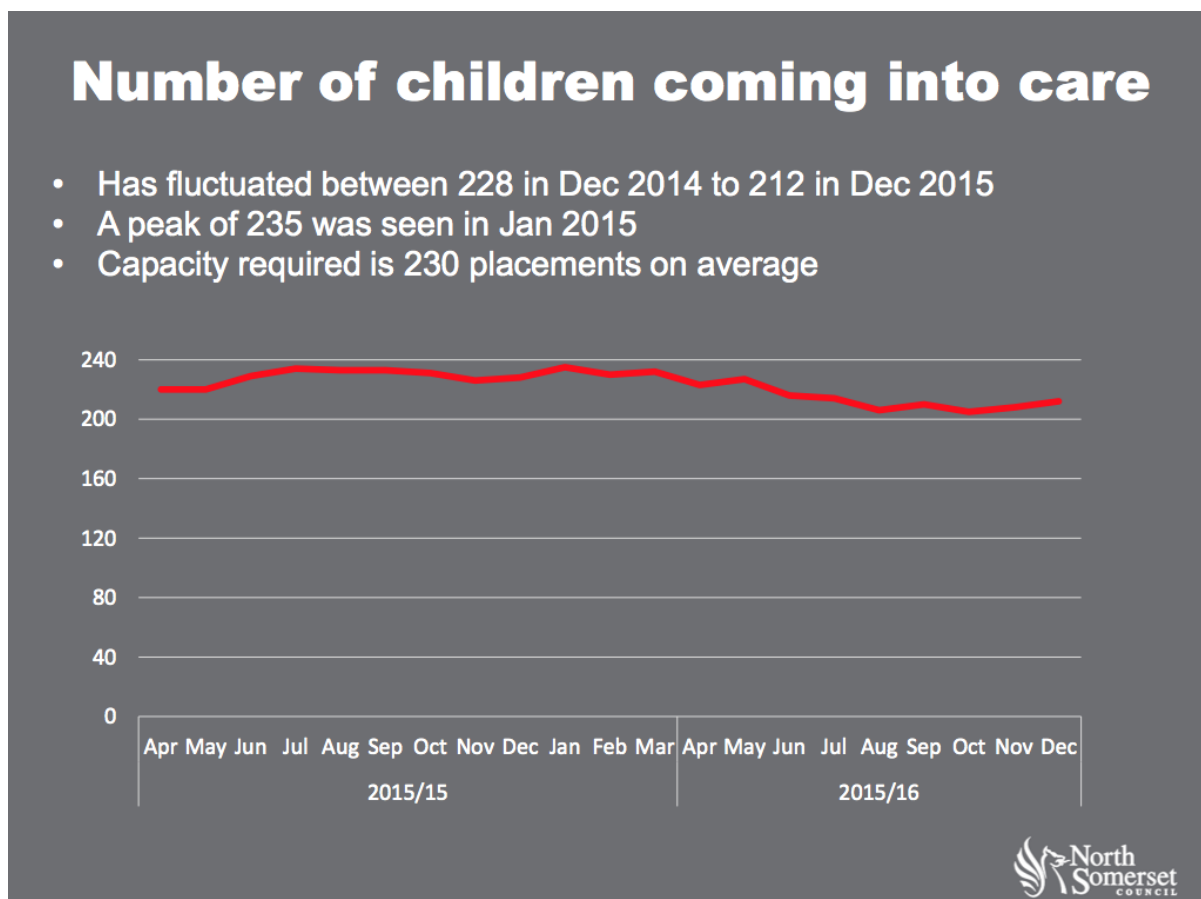
In particular we have a deficiency of main stream foster carers, BME carers, adolescent placements, placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, emergency foster care placements and placements for sibling groups. Our data suggests that our Children Looked After are more likely to reach permanence and stability through in house placement provision rather than provision through independent sector provision. Placing children with in house carers also means children are more likely to be placed within the North Somerset Boundary, closer to their family, friends and local connections which is likely to increase their emotional well-being, sense of identity and belonging and mean we are more able to locally support children and young people both within our care and when they leave our care.

Although we recognise the independent sector adds a valuable resource to ensure a mixed foster placement economy our strategy is focused on the increase and promotion of in house foster carers for the reasons outlined above.

Introduction

This document sets out the North Somerset Fostering Strategy for September 2016-18. The purpose of this document is to outline the strategic vision and objectives which are required to ensure sufficiency of foster placements for our Children Looked After and to ensure these placements provide our Children Looked After with high quality care, therapeutic re-parenting, love, emotional warmth and permanence where long term matching has taken place.

Nationally there has been an increased demand for placements for Children Looked After which has increased in line with the higher rate of care proceedings issued by Local Authorities. This has in turn placed additional demands on foster placements on a national scale, and within North Somerset. This has resulted in an increasing reliance in using Independent Sector Placements to care for our Children Looked After due to our in house foster care provision struggling to meet this demand. We have found difficulties in accessing independent foster placements within or close to North Somerset meaning more of our children are being placed out of county which is an issue that is also reflected within the national picture of placements for Children Looked After.



(Source DfE, 2016)

It is estimated by the Fostering Network that currently there are 64,000 children being cared for by approximately 55,000 fostering families. They estimate that an additional 9,070 foster families will be required to meet the increasing demand for foster placements within the next 12 months. Regionally this equates to an additional 600 placements within the South

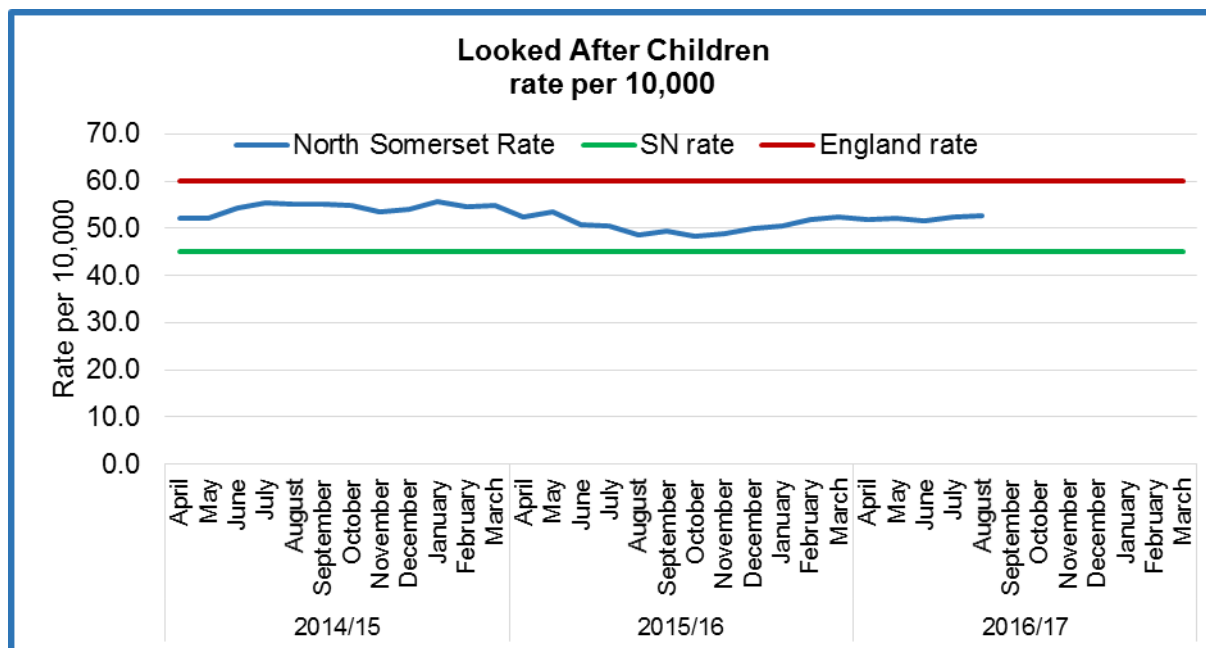
West. Particular demand is noted for foster carers to provide loving homes to teenagers, children with disabilities, sibling groups, children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people (Fostering Network, 2016).

Context within North Somerset

Profile of our children who are looked after

North Somerset has an approximate child population of 45,600 children in 2015 (0-18), and of this number approximately 220 – 230 children are looked after by the local authority at any one time. Proportionally North Somerset has a lower population of Children Looked After than the national average but a higher proportion than statistical neighbours. The reasons children come into care are varied but often due to children experiencing physical, sexual and emotional abuse or neglect. In order to calculate our recruitment targets for the future, we have based our statistics on the population of our Children Looked After which on average is approximately 230.

Throughout April to August of 2016 the number of Children Looked After has remained steady at between 223 and 227 children which is a rate of around 52 per 10,000 children.



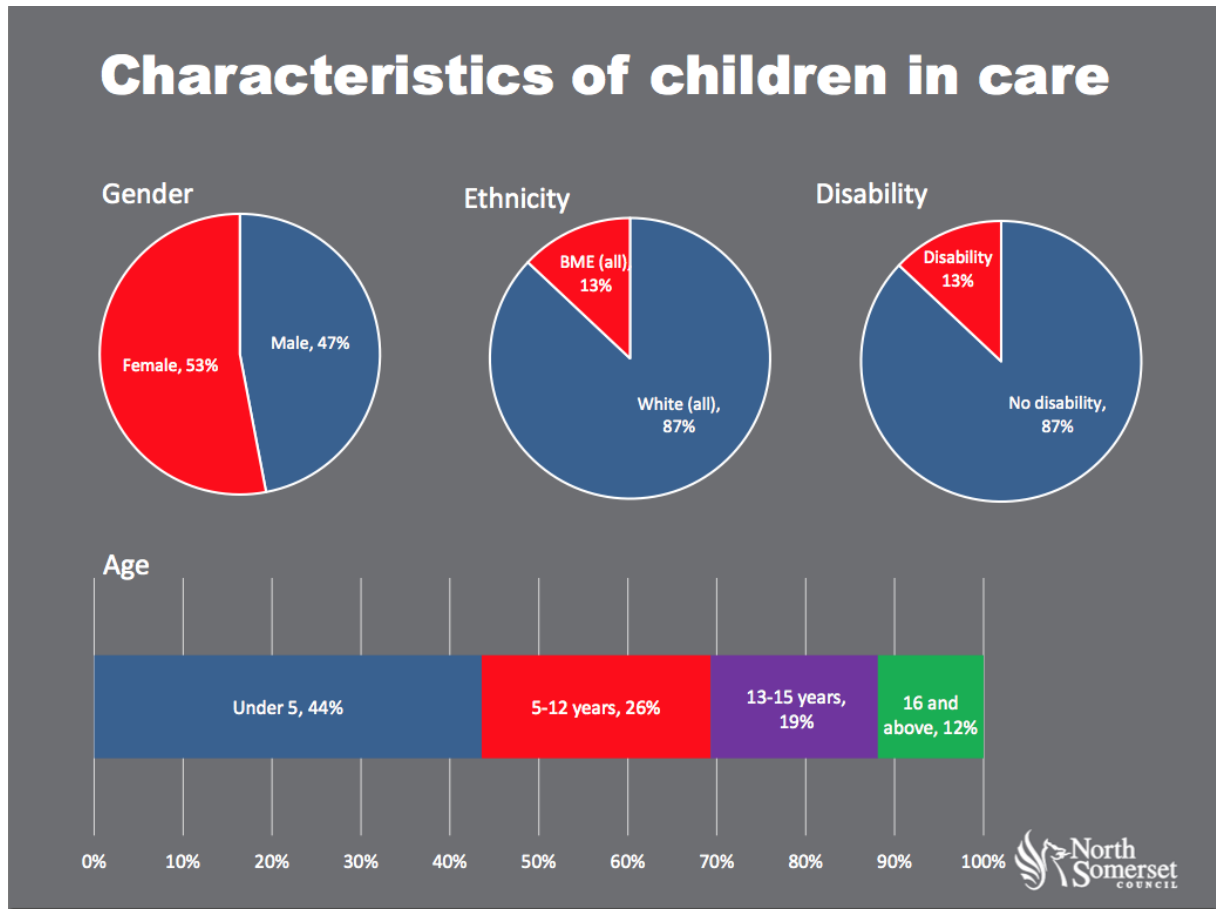
Demographic analysis of the CLA cohort throughout April to August 2016 shows that:

- The split between males and females is about equal.
- The percentage of BME children who are looked after is slightly higher than would be expected as a comparison against the population (compared against Census 2011).

The main reasons for children becoming looked after are:-

- Abuse or neglect
- Family in acute stress

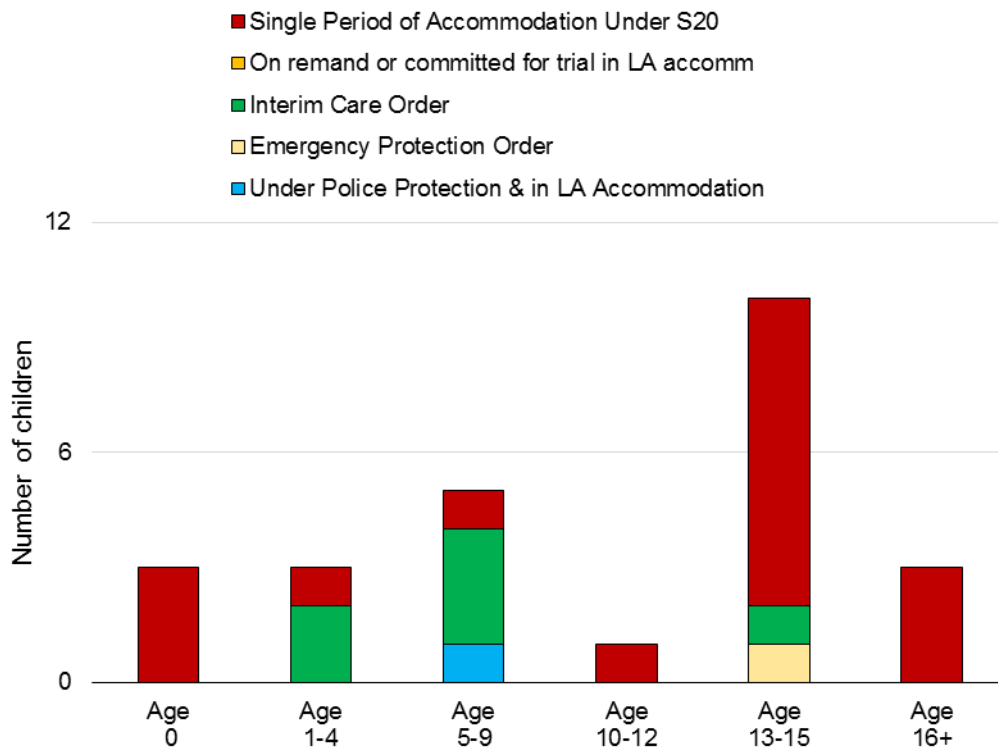
- Family dysfunction
- Absent parenting
- Disability
- Parent illness or disability



A snapshot of the legal status of Children Looked After as at the end of Q1 2014/15 shows that 68% of CLA started to be looked after under a S20 (single period of accommodation) and 24% started to be looked after under an Interim Care Order. Just 8% started to be looked after under Police Protection or an Emergency Protection Order.

Legal Status at start of being looked after	%	NSC 2014/15 %	England 2014/15 %
Under Police Protection & in LA Accommodation	4%	12%	14%
Emergency Protection Order	4%	13%	
Interim Care Order	24%	19%	21%
On remand or committed for trial in LA accommodation	0%	1%	3%
Single Period of Accommodation Under S20	68%	56%	62%

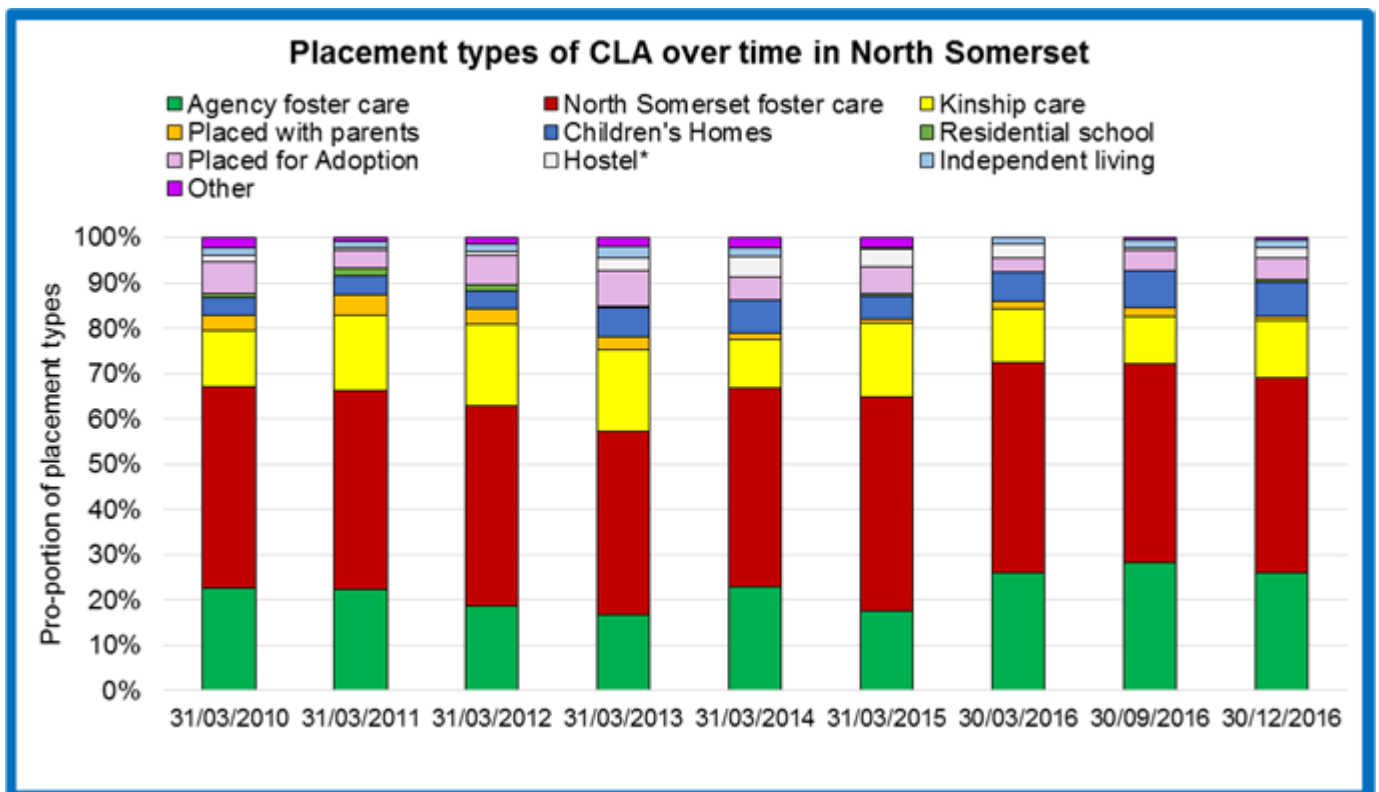
Number of children starting to be looked after by legal status and age



Placements

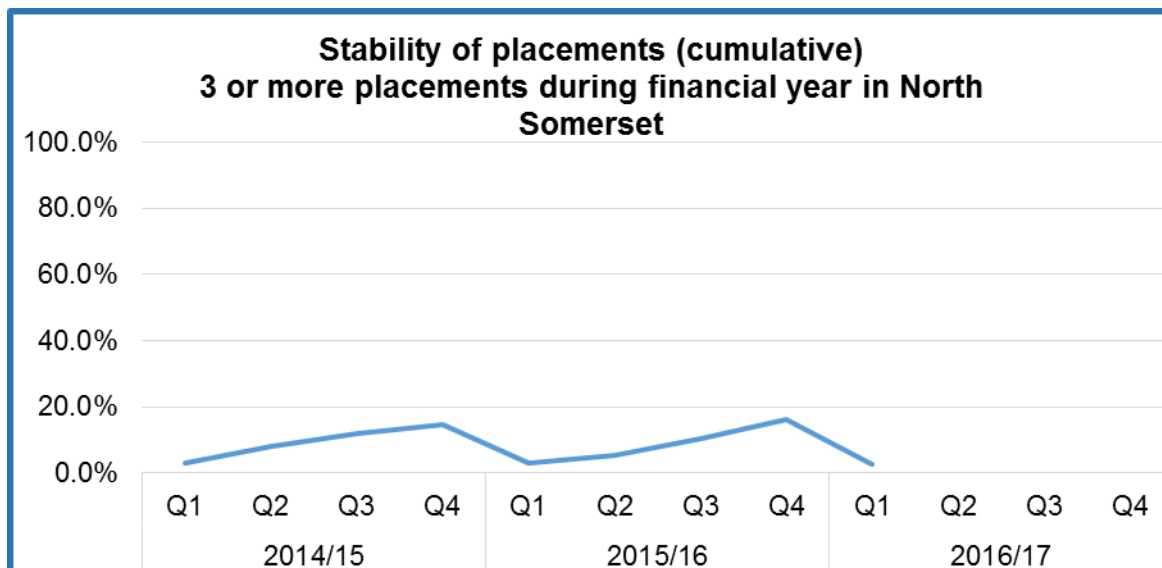
As of Q1 for 2016/17, 44% of Children Looked After were placed within North Somerset foster care, 29% were placed within agency foster care and 9% were placed within kinship care. In total 82% were placed in a combination of these care settings across North Somerset compared to 76% nationally in March 2015.

	March 2014	March 2015	March 2016	June 2016	England 31/03/2015
Agency foster care	23%	17%	26%	29%	64%
North Somerset foster care	44%	47%	46%	44%	
Kinship care	11%	16%	12%	9%	12%

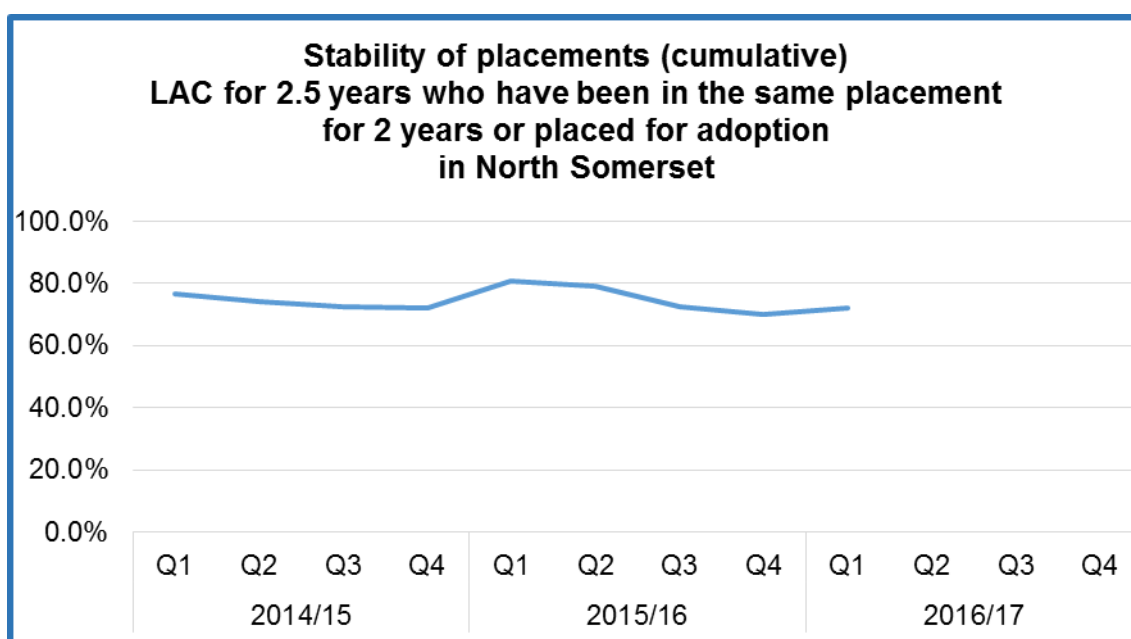


The stability of placements (the number of CLA that had 3 or more placements) during Q1 of 2016/17 was 2.7%, with 6 children having experienced 3 or more placements during this time period.

This compares to 3.2% during Q1 of 2015/16 (7 children) and 3.1% during Q1 of 2014/15 (7 children).



The long term stability of placements (children who have been looked after for 2.5 years who have been in the same placement for 2 years or are placed for adoption) was 72.1% as at the end of Q1 for 2016/17. This compares to 80.9% as of Q1 in 2015/16 and 76.4% as of the end of Q1 for 2014/15.



Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

In respect of unaccompanied asylum seeking children there has been a Government policy change which came into effect on the 1st July 2016 which impacts upon the care arrangements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Historically the receiving local authority for found unaccompanied asylum seeking children would retain responsibility for their welfare and care as Children Looked After and when those young people left care. From the 1st July 2016 unaccompanied asylum seeking children will be accommodated on a regional basis to reduce pressure on local authorities with a high number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. It has been agreed that each Local Authority should be able to provide provision at maximum for 0.07% of their look after children population for UASC. For North Somerset this equates to a maximum of 30 children. We currently have 6 USAC children placed in our care. It has been agreed that the co-ordination of this scheme will be run by South West Councils. Our fostering

strategy will include how we plan to increase the diversity and skills base of foster carers and supported lodgings hosts to meet the needs of this increasing population of children and young people within North Somerset.

Profile of North Somerset Foster Carer Population

North Somerset currently have a total pool of 77 mainstream registered fostering households (excluding kinship foster carers).

This pool can deliver a maximum of 133 placements. Operationally however, after taking into consideration carers on hold because of holidays, allegations, ill health, adoption and those who only provide respite there are 66 mainstream foster households which are currently delivering on average 100 in house placements, which is a significant shortfall in the number of required foster placements. Within our fostering pool 66 carers can provide short term foster care and 48 families can provide long term foster care (taking into account that some households have dual approval). As of 1st September 2016 North Somerset had 6 vacant mainstream carers which equates to 7 fostering vacancies. Generally the proportion of vacant placements within North Somerset fluctuates from 0-8 with children between the ages of 12-18 being the most challenging to place with in house foster families. Of those foster carers with vacancies there are generally specific matching considerations e.g. potential impact on other children in placement.

Breakdown of fostering placements offered per household:-

	1	2	3	Number of Households	Total number of places
Maximum Number of places					
Mainstream Foster Carers	36	26	15	77	133

Currently 21 carers are approved for children aged 0-18, 24 carers are approved for ages 0-12 and 32 carers are approved for children aged 5-18.

Foster carer population demographics

Age

Age	Under 30	Aged 30 to 39	Aged 40 to 49	Aged 50 to 54	Aged 55 to 59	Aged 60 to 64	Aged 65 to 69	Aged 70 or over	Sum
Mainstream Foster Carers	0	18	37	31	19	15	6	7	133

Ethnicity

Ethnicity	White British	White Irish	White Other						Sum
Mainstream Foster Carers	130	1	2						133

Number of years fostering

Time fostered	Up to 5 Years	6 to10 years	11 to 15 years	16 to 20 years	20 years Plus	Sum
Mainstream Foster Carers	36	28	5	4	4	77

Number of years approved

Time fostered	Up to 5 Years	6 to10 years	11 to 15 years	16 to 20 years	20 years Plus	Sum
Mainstream Foster Carers	38	27	4	4	4	77

Substantially the predominant reasons our foster carers cease fostering or move to another fostering agency are as follows:-

- Permanency provided for a child/ren looked after through application for an SGO
- Reunification of child/ren looked after with their birth family
- Child looked after reached 18 years old
- Change in family circumstances (relationship breakdown / change of working pattern / relocation / finances / pregnancy)
- Retired
- Adopted
- Health reasons
- Transfer to another scheme within the Local Authority
- Local Authority makes the decision to deregister due to concerns around their practice

Types of fostering

North Somerset believe that fostering is providing a safe, caring home for a child and / or young person who is unable to live with their own family. We offer a range of types of fostering to match the specific skills and experience of the foster carer with the needs of the children or young people.

Mainstream Fostering

Our mainstream foster carers can be approved to offer short and / or long term care to a child. Our short term foster carers will care for a child and prepare them to either return home or move on to a permanent placement. If a child is unable to return home and an alternative form of permanency such as adoption or SGO is not achievable or in their best interests a long term fostering family may be identified to provide a home for a child or young person until they reach independence.

Respite Fostering

Our respite foster carers can offer a short break for children and their mainstream foster carers generally during weekends or holidays. This is generally part of a child's care plan (e.g. to improve their socialisation) or to support placement stability.

Specialist Fostering

The Fostering Service also provides a range of more specialist fostering to children and young people who meet the appropriate criteria for example children and young people with additional or complex needs.

Emergency Duty placements

Of our foster carer pool 9 families are approved to provide EDT placements which involves caring for a child placed in an emergency situation (usually outside of office hours) for up to 24 hours. Our EDT provision is currently being reviewed.

Supported Lodgings

Supported Lodgings Hosts will make a room available in their home to young people (aged 16 – 21 years) who have been in foster care or a residential home. Their role is to advise on basic life skills to help prepare young people for independent living and to offer general support when needed and according to the young person's Pathway Plan. Currently we have 7 active supported lodgings carers in North Somerset. There is the potential to grow this service to meet the changing needs of the demographic of children within our care.

Family Link

Family Link carers offer regular short breaks to support families who have a child with a learning disability or moderate physical disability. These children are not looked after.

Independent Foster placement provision

There is one independent foster agency framework contract in place within North Somerset consisting of 37 agencies. This contract will end in March 2017 and a new framework is currently being tendered. There are additional IFAs we can contract with on a spot purchase basis but these are based beyond North Somerset's neighbouring LAs.

Quality of our foster placements for children and young people

In July 2016 North Somerset took part in the Bright Spots Survey in partnership with Bristol University and Coram Voice. 177 children and young people were asked to participate in the survey between the ages of 4-18 and the return from this population of children was 55%.

The key findings from this piece of research will help inform our fostering strategy to ensure our children who are looked after are cared for in warm, loving, safe foster families where they can thrive. The findings of the survey do not differentiate between children placed within in house carers and independent sector provision which will need to be taken into account when considering the impact of these results for our in house fostering strategy. The key findings are as follows:-

- It is critically important that our children who are looked after can identify trusted safe adults within their lives, and that they are able to trust their foster carers. The survey found that of those who returned their responses 76% of children and young people trusted their carers most of the time. This was lower than the average response rate within the other local authorities which took part. Overall 100% of children 8-11 and 83% of children aged 11-18 could identify one key trusted adult within their lives.
- The survey did show that 15% of children aged 11-18 felt that adults had behaved in a way that drew attention to their care status, which they found to be embarrassing. Although this was not specifically identified as happening within foster families it is a key finding that needs to be considered within planning for even better placement quality for our Children Looked After. Regarding the sensitivity of the care our children who are looked after received, it was noted that as children became older the proportion who felt their carers noticed their feelings decreased. Of children aged 4-8 all children felt their carers noticed their feelings, compared to 61% of children aged 8-11 and 57% of children and young people aged 11-18.
- A high proportion of our Children Looked After reported that they felt safe and settled within their foster placements, of children aged 4-8 100% felt safe within their foster placements, 99% of children aged 8-11 also felt safe and 75% of children aged 11-18 reported always feeling safe within the home they lived with 99% of the 11-18 years young people 'always' or 'sometimes' feeling safe. The survey demonstrated that children and young people looked after by North Somerset demonstrated higher than average scores than children and young people from other participating local authorities.
- In respect of the opportunities our children who are looked after receive for fun and hobbies 100% of 4-7 year olds stated they had fun during their weekends, for 8-11 year olds it was 95% and for 11-18 years old it was 63%. Of the total population of children involved in the survey 95% of children aged 8-11 and 87% of children aged 11-18 had access to outdoor activities which can help build resilience and reduce stress and emotional turmoil for children and young people.
- Within the survey children aged 8-18 were asked about whether their carers showed an interest in their learning and achievements educationally. All of the children aged 8-11 and 90% of children aged 11-18 felt their carers were interested in their learning

and achievement. This does suggest there is a strong interest and commitment to the learning of our Children Looked After within their foster families, although it is a concern that 10% of children aged 11-18 did not consider that their carer were interested in their learning and achievement.

- Regarding the opportunities to build independence skills within foster care 75% of children aged 11-18 said they were taught independence skills within their foster family but a quarter of those children surveyed did not deem this to be the case.
- It is evident from this research that a high proportion of our Children Looked After feel secure and happy in their foster placement and there is evidence of a high proportion of our younger Children Looked After experiencing high levels of emotional well-being. However it is evident that further work is required to ensure that all Children Looked After feel safe and secure within their foster placements and that their activities and learning are appropriately promoted and prioritised to build their resilience and enhance their future life opportunities.

Some direct quotes from the children and young people surveyed about their experience in foster care are as follows:-

Children aged 4-7:-

- *I like my foster carers. They let me have treats. Nothing could be better about being in care.*
- *A bigger bedroom but everything else is okay.*
- *I like my foster mummy combing my hair, it is very nice and Mummy didn't do it like she can.*
- *More help with doing my homework with my carers'.*

Child aged 8-11:-

- *I feel amazed by my foster career and I have a good life but I worry about my family because I don't know what they are doing.*

Children aged 11-18

- *It can change your life.*
- *It can be helpful but [it] can be really controlling.*
- *Mostly fun but my opinions count so it's good to be listened to.*
- *It is fun being in care.*
- *I wouldn't change anything, I liked growing up in care.*

SECTION 3: RECRUITMENT

3.1 Recruitment statistics

Over the past three years the fostering service has delivered on average a maximum of 110 placements amounting to 47% of overall placements. 24% of placements are being provided by Independent Fostering Agencies. In April 2015 the fostering recruitment approach was transformed and key changes were made:

- Introduced a more targeted recruitment strategy
- Appointed a dedicated Recruitment Social Worker
- Re-branded and updated all fostering merchandise, literature and the website including developing a social media presence
- Increased presence in the local community and attendance at targeted events
- Developed an Ambassadors Group using existing foster carers
- Improved working relationships with internal Communications Team delivering increased positive press articles, and targeted distribution of literature
- We have run a series of workshops targeting statutory services and key large scale local industry making use of the Chief Executive's office to promote the activity
- Currently developing promotional videos for the website.
- Use of social media

There were 203 enquires between April 2015 and February 2016 as opposed to 165 for April 2014 to March 2015. The number of carers approved at panel in 2015/16 currently stands at 4. This is indicative of the lack of recruitment activity in 2014/15 and we expect the positive work we have undertaken over the last 12 months to be reflected in the 2016/17 figures. Currently for 2016-2017 over 30 participants have attended the Skills to Foster Course as preparation for being assessed as foster carers. To maximise our recruitment opportunities we provide prospective foster carers with the opportunity to access Skills to Foster Training from other local authorities where appropriate.

Successful recruitment requires:-

- Focused management time to drive the processes
- A high quality communication strategy which includes the effective use of all forms of media
- Targeted recruitment activity
- Brand management and the creation of a positive “buzz” which includes active use of foster carers in recruitment
- An attractive package of support and remuneration
- An efficient, and supportive assessment process
- Sufficient staff and management capacity
- The involvement of foster carer’s within the recruitment process, including the development of a “word of mouth” strategy

Initial Enquiry to Approval

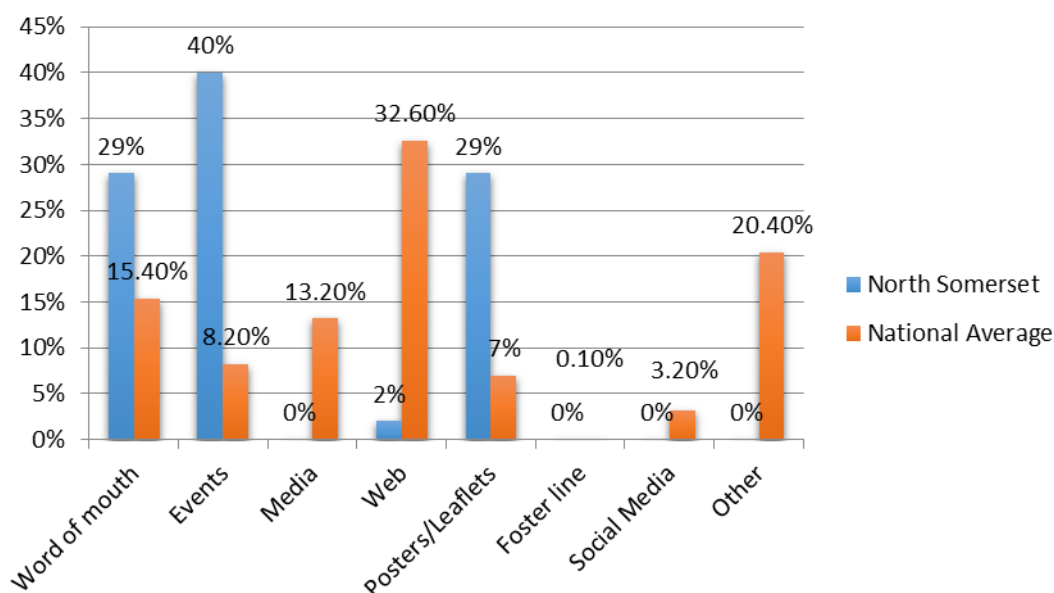
Fostering Network has estimated how many enquiries a Local Authority should receive each year, which is that each Local Authority should receive approximately 74.1% enquiries to the numbers of Children Looked After i.e. 228. This equates to generating at least 169 enquiries per year. Between April 2015 and March 2016 North Somerset received 228 enquiries (a significant increase on previous years). Between March 2016 and September 2016 North Somerset received 110 enquiries; therefore if we continue to receive enquiries at the same rate, we estimate receiving approximately 200-230 enquiries by the end of the financial year (March 2017).

	North Somerset	National Average
Enquiries	264	378
Children Looked After	228	550
Ratio	86.4%	74.1%

Within North Somerset, enquiries are mainly generated from events or via the website. Word of mouth, press articles and posters / leaflets have also created a significant number of enquiries.

The vast majority of fostering enquiries are received via the fostering email address. Very few enquiries are received via North Somerset's SPA (single point of access) telephone system. Further training and guidance to SPA staff is planned and will be rolled out in 2016.

Source of Enquiries



The national average of enquiries resulting in approval is 10.5%. North Somerset's conversion rate for 2015-2016 was 7% and this is therefore an area within which we need to review to identify how we can improve our conversion rate within this area whilst ensuring continued robust recruitment of foster carers.

	North Somerset	National Average
Initial Enquiries	186	378

Approval	13	34
Enquiry to Approval	7%	10.5%

The following table provides an overview of North Somerset's performance in the recruitment process, compared to the national average. It shows the percentage of potential carers moving from one stage of the recruitment process to the next.

	North Somerset	National Average
Enquiry to initial visit	43%	30.6%
Initial visit to training	19.8%	48.8%
Training to application	70%	71%
Application to assessment	60.9%	85%
Assessment to approval	92.9%	78.7%

It is estimated that the average time taken from enquiry to approval in North Somerset is 9 months. This is in line with the national average which currently is 9.2 months. Our aim is to reduce this to 8 months in line with national guidance with a longer term aim to reduce this to 6 months to ensure North Somerset is presenting as an effective competitor within the fostering recruitment market.

The statistics indicate that North Somerset has higher conversion rate from enquiry to initial visit than the national average which may indicate that more robust screening is required at the initial enquiry stage. A more robust approach to initial enquiries may then see an increase in the proportion of carers converting from initial visit to the Skills to Foster training which would bring North Somerset closer to the national average data and would ensure resources are targeted more effectively. This process will be reviewed as part of the fostering strategy and will be aided by the recruitment and development of dedicated recruitment staff.

3.2 Recruitment Analysis

The main source of enquires for Fostering in North Somerset is generated from events held, poster / leaflets and word of mouth. The national data of where enquiries are generated, confirms that the main source of enquiries come from the web, word of mouth and the media. As such we have introduced a 'refer a friend' incentive for foster carers. In addition, use of social media has been identified as a positive source to generate enquiries and over the last 12 months we have launched an updated fostering website along with Facebook and Twitter pages. Our recruitment campaign must include information and advertisements via the internet, i.e. web, Google, social media, in addition to radio campaigns.

We are receiving above average numbers of enquiries, in line with the population of Children Looked After within North Somerset. However our conversion rate (7%) from enquiry to approval is lower than the national average (10.5%). There may be a number of reasons why our conversion rate is not higher. It could be that we are looking at targeted recruitment, our screening process is more rigorous or improvements are needed in our recruitment process.

The data collected has highlighted aspects of the recruitment process where we are achieving and where improvements are needed. The data confirms that we are successfully

progressing enquiries to initial visits; however the numbers of cases that progress from initial visit to training are low, in comparison to the national average. We are successfully progressing applicants from training to making an application, however are falling low on the numbers of applications to assessment. Our approval rate from assessment is higher than the national average.

The data confirms that improvements are needed in retaining potential carers from the initial visit to training and from them completing an application to progressing to a full assessment. There could be a number of reasons to account for this:

- Not keeping in touch with potential carers on a regular basis once they have made the initial enquiry. This could be improved by engaging our current foster carers in the process to support and inform the potential carers.
- We have been more selective in terms of applications we are accepting and ruling out people at an earlier stage. Our focus has been targeted to recruit carers for teenagers.
- We have been undertaking initial visits before potential carers have attended information evenings.
- North Somerset is a small Local Authority and due to low numbers, we have not been able to run regular Skills to Foster Training sessions. We need to look at ways of improving this process by working with neighbouring Local Authorities and agencies to share resources and training

Based on the figure of 230 Children Looked After, our target number of enquiries should be 169 per year. The conversion rate from enquiry to approval should be 10% to comply with the national average; therefore North Somerset should be looking to recruit 14- 18 mainstream foster carers per year. Due to the increased demand for the number and specialisms required for foster families for Children Looked After we have set an ambitious target of recruiting 20 carers per year which include recruitment of family link foster carers and supported lodgings hosts.

The Fostering Network's formula for predicting the numbers of approved mainstream foster carers needed per year takes into account the numbers of foster carers who will be de-registered. We know that the national average percentage of de-registrations per year is 12%; therefore North Somerset should expect to lose 10 foster carers (households) per year.

We have predicted that within the next 10 years approximately 40% of our foster carers may be looking to retire. This needs to be taken into consideration when looking at targets for future recruitment. The Fostering Network reports that whilst the top three ages to start thinking about fostering are 30, 35 and 40 years old; the most common ages on approval are 40, 44 and 45 years old.

In order to help target our recruitment of foster carers, we need to take into account the profiles of the current foster carers within North Somerset, i.e. where they live, marital status, ages of birth children, employment etc in addition to the profiles and needs of Children Looked After. In addition, comparing our data to the national average helps us to identify where we need to improve our current recruitment processes.

We know from the research carried out by The Fostering Network that the most successful recruitment campaigns involve direct face to face contact, therefore any campaigns arranged need to have staff and foster carers present to discuss the benefits, process and

experiences of fostering. We acknowledge that we exist in a competitive market place and therefore we must ensure early and efficient response rates to ensure that we do not lose potential carers to independent fostering agencies.

The information gathered has highlighted that registered foster carers can support the Fostering Team in both recruitment of new foster carers and the retention of current carers.

3.3 Recruitment Aims and Objectives

When looking at targeted recruitment, it is important that we have an understanding of the Children Looked After within North Somerset, in addition to understanding people's motivation to foster and the profile of our current carers. The data collected has helped us identify that we need to target recruitment in the following areas:

Registration – Target and recruit more foster carers to take

- 11 – 17 year olds
- Sibling groups
- Youth Justice foster placements
- Parent and Child placements
- Long term, short term and EDT placements
- Specialist skills level carer
- Regular respite placements for children with complex needs
- Placements for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Profile – Target and recruit foster carers who

- Live in all areas of North Somerset but in particular, Weston-Super-Mare
- Black and Minority Ethnic carer's
- Work within caring settings such as in child care, health, high managerial roles, Local Authority, charities, and are active in the community

Recruitment process – we need to

- Generate at least 169 enquiries per year
- Improve our conversion rate from enquiry to approval
- Improve our average time duration from enquiry to approval
- Improve our conversion from initial visit to training
- Improve our conversion from application to assessment
- Work with neighbouring Local Authorities and charities to share training and resources
- Work with our colleagues in Adoption, Supported Lodgings and Family Link to maximize efficiency in recruitment.
- Address why we are not receiving enquiries via North Somerset's SPA telephone system. This is likely to increase our enquiries to foster in North Somerset.
- Include recruitment via the internet and radio/media and consider the use of digital marketing organisations.
- Develop North Somerset's current website and create an information website for existing foster carers and potential carers.
- Increase the participation of foster carers within the recruitment process both through training, support for new carers and using 'word of mouth' as a recruitment method.

SECTION 4: RETENTION

Retention Analysis

The retention of foster carers has three vital components

- **Highly effective Care Planning for children placed with them** - this includes the accuracy of information presented to the carers, good working relationships with the children's social workers and timely responses to issues as and when they emerge.
- **A strong supportive framework** - this includes consistent support from the foster carers' Supervising Social Workers, good network of support groups, access to training, consistently applied policies and procedures, clearly understood and efficient remuneration package
- **Access to high quality services when required** - a major issue in retaining placements is the impact of aspects of the child's needs not being met, a crucial one being education. Placements are much more likely to break down and carers become dissatisfied when there is no clear education provision for the young person placed with them. Another key issue is the provision of therapeutic support. Many children have significant emotional and psychological needs and carers need good quality support in these areas.

4.1 Retention feedback and service provision

Foster carer Feedback

In 2014 The Fostering Network completed a piece of research entitled 'The State of the Nation's Foster Care' (Ward and Sanders, 2014), within which foster carers gave the following feedback in respect of what they felt was required to support them in caring for Children Looked After and to remain a foster carer. Four main themes were identified from this research:-

'For foster carers to be respected and treated as a skilled co-professional, and to be recognised as part of the team working with the child; often, in fact, they are the person who knows the child best. Foster carers felt that not only should their experience and expertise be valued and listened to about day-to-day care, but also in long-term planning for children. Foster carers also told us that they wanted to be recognised and treated as professionals by teachers, health care workers, police and others involved in children's lives'.

'For foster carers to be given authority to make everyday decisions about the care of their fostered children. Repeatedly, foster carers told us that they wanted to be trusted more, so that children and young people could be treated as part of the family and not be made to feel 'different'.

Foster carers said that they, and the children in their care, needed to have better access to and consistency of social workers. Many spoke of overwhelming caseloads for social workers meaning that they were not as available as carers and young people would like.

A problem consistently flagged up was the constant change of social workers, particularly for its impact on children. There was also a call for improved communication with foster carers, and for more listening to what children and young people say.

Foster carers said that they need to receive proper financial support, to enable them to focus on caring for children and not worrying about their financial situation. Some spoke of feeling pressurised to take part-time jobs when the needs of the children were such that they felt they should be at home. In addition to adequate allowances and fees, carers raised the issue of retainers, holiday pay, sick leave and pensions.

A significant proportion of foster carers (31%) also expressed concern that they did not always receive the relevant information in respect of the child/ren looked after at the time of the placement being made.

Ofsted collected information from approved foster carers in 2013 within North Somerset which concluded that:

- 72% feel training and guidance provided is excellent
- 82% feel their initial enquiry about becoming a foster carer was dealt with efficiently and promptly
- 79% feel their own children have access to the Fostering Services
- 79% feel their Supervising Social Worker helps them to understand and meet their foster child's needs
- 68% feel they are part of the professional team working around the child
- 93% are clear about decisions they can make for their foster children
- 89% feel the out of hours service support is a good service
- 96% feel they are well matched with their foster child

In 2013 a North Somerset report called "Improving outcomes for children and young people" produced by Helen Caldwell provided feedback from foster carers about the fostering service. The feedback highlighted foster carers felt that:

- Placements work better for children if there is good partnership between them, the child care social worker and their Supervising Social Worker (SSW)
- It helps to have clear expectations of the role of the foster carer
- The CONSULT Service was a valuable support, in specific when developing and creating strategies to support young people.
- Outcomes for children are more positive when all relevant information is provided to foster carers
- Working in partnership with their Supervising Social Worker was more effective than feeling like they were being supervised, which makes them feel at times less supported.
- There needs to be more consistency with payments, holidays and support available to children.
- We need to implement a clear manual for foster carers.

We have collected feedback from our foster carers through a variety of sources:

- Via their Supervising Social Worker
- Individual meetings with the Team Leader and Consultant Social Workers
- Questionnaires to foster carers

- Feedback from Annual Reviews
- Quarterly meetings with the Foster Carers' Association
- Bi monthly informal coffee mornings with foster carers
- Two Fostering Team Days for all members of the Fostering Team

Through our fostering strategy we aim to increase the level of foster carer participation and feedback within the design and delivery of the Foster Care Service including service development, foster carer feedback foster carer recruitment and Foster Carer Support. We have recognized that we require a more regular thematic reporting of foster carer feedback to assist in the design and delivery of the Fostering Service.

4.3 Training

Training and development remains an intrinsic part of fostering. The North Somerset Fostering Service provides a robust training programme which aims to ensure all carers are trained in the skills required to provide high quality care and meet the needs of each child/young person placed in their care (National Minimum Standards 23.1 Department for Education 2011).

Training is applied for and recorded through North Somerset's CPD (Continuing Professional Development) online and is currently also recorded on LCS. Each carer is expected to have their training and development record kept up to date and presented as part of their annual review. This includes indicating which mandatory training they have done in relation to their skill levels and identified training and development needs for the future. These needs are gathered from carers across the service and inform planning for future training.

The training is provided for free, drawing on experts such as the Virtual School, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and CONSULT. It is held at local venues with child care expenses covered. This makes it easier for foster carers to attend training, and is a key benefit of fostering for North Somerset compared to some other agencies.

Since April 2008, each carer has been expected to complete their Training, Support and Development Standard portfolio within a year of being approved (18 months for kinship carers).

The range and quality of training in North Somerset has an excellent track record, it is highly valued by foster carers and regional practitioners. However it does need to be regularly refreshed in order to respond to development in policy and practice. Within our fostering strategy we are planning to review our training offer again to ensure training and development offered to foster carers is focused on increasing knowledge and skills in respect of therapeutic parenting and other specialisms where appropriate and required.

The aims for training and career development are:

- Promote training opportunities well in advance, by online and printed foster carer communications (website, email, newsletter, fostering story/case studies) as well as communicating directly via supervision / support groups.
- Ensure practice and parenting is informed by research
- Ensure all carers are offered opportunities and support to complete mandatory training.
- Ensure all carers have access to the **Research in Practice** free Fostering and Adoption website:
- Further consider whether offering the new 'Coffee and Learn' concept consisting of themed sessions with guest speakers that fit with carers' needs introducing new concepts/taster topics is an effective way of engaging carers in their training and development.
- Elicit feedback on training via the new foster carer questionnaires (to rate satisfaction with training availability, subjects, delivery, access to multi-agency support)
- Continue to monitor the quality of training provided via the on-line evaluation system.
- Promote the benefits of progression to Advanced Level, so that more carers can meet the individual or specialist needs of children looked after
- Marketing to work with training providers to ensure the members' site works in harmony with the internal CPD training site.
- Working with others to develop learning opportunities and to explore accrediting foster carer training e.g. with Weston College
- Arrange routine joint training across the Resource Service, to include foster carers, supervising social workers, child care social workers and IROs, in particular to support embedding the therapeutic re-parenting model

4.4 Aims and objectives for training, support and retention of foster carers

This section is informed by the analysis of Children Looked After and foster carers in Section 2 and the retention analysis in Section 4.

When considering support and retention of our foster carers we need to examine the needs of the children they are caring for, the processes used for identifying placements, matching children and carers, and planning to meet their needs.

The carers need to be supervised, trained and supported to meet those children's needs.

The Fostering Service needs to be actively involved in developing the service it provides, and involving foster carers and young people in this as well.

Clear Analysis of Children's Needs

- Understanding of children's needs as a looked after population
- Understanding of individual children's needs
- Identify children who are in pre-proceedings, so that we can consider the placements that could be required for children coming into care
- Assessment placements to be given a fuller knowledge of individual children
- Work with the 'Improving Outcomes'/ CONSULT process to consider the appropriate meetings, plans and services which will help meet children's needs
- Work with CONSULT to develop analysis of children's needs, and plans and strategies for carers to meet those needs

- Continue to develop the work with the Disabled Children's Team, Youth Offending Service and Community Family Teams to share specialist knowledge and skills about children's needs

Improve Placement Matching and Planning

- More effective matching process including use of placement referral form and long term matching forms
- Placement planning for new placements
- Long term planning process including Long Term Planning Meetings
- Utilise vacant placements, whilst also bearing in mind the needs of other children in that fostering family
- Ensure carers feel supported with specific issues that arise for the children they care for
- Develop foster carer profiles for use by child care social workers for matching, and by children as part of introductions to placements
- Develop respite placements to support complex children in placements
- As a wider range of carer's and placements becomes available match carer's with children from various ethnic backgrounds or sibling groups.

Service Support Provision

North Somerset offer a range of services to support foster carers:

- Dedicated duty system (updated in 2015) to provide comprehensive oversight, tracking and matching of children with potential foster carers and to provide support to foster carers during office hours if their supervising social worker is unavailable.
- Support Groups targeted to meet the needs of foster carers including:
 - Support for Carers of Teenagers
 - Under 5s Stay and Play
 - Adoption Support Group
 - SAFE – Support Group for Carers Looking After Children with Additional Needs
 - To Approval and Beyond – support for carer during the approval process and their first two years of fostering
 - Caring Crusaders – support group for sons and daughters of foster carers
 - In 2017 we will introduce a support group for carers working with unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people
- Comprehensive training plan including continual assessment linked to payment for skills. In February 2016 we agreed to fund a new on-line level 3 qualification to replace the NVQ level 3 for carers wishing to progress from intermediate to advanced skills level
- Bi-monthly Foster Carer Newsletter celebrating the achievements of foster carers (and Children Looked After) and keeping them up to date and informed of events within the Fostering Service and local community and providing advice and information.
- Updated website including a members' only section for foster carers and a dedicated social media presence.

- Dedicated CONSULT Service focused on meeting the mental health and emotional needs of Children Looked After and improving placement stability
- Annual awards and recognition event.
- Dedicated North Somerset Foster Carers' Association and membership of The Fostering Network.
- Group work and direct work sessions for children looked after that is delivered by two dedicated family support key workers who have a specific remit around improving placement stability.
- Research in Practice Membership

The aims of the Fostering Support Team are as follows:

- To promote the best possible outcomes for children and young people through careful matching with a foster family who are able to provide a positive alternative to / alongside their own family.
- To provide Children Looked After with a safe, stable and nurturing environment where they can form positive attachments that will support them in achieving their full potential and promoting permanence.
- To work in partnership with foster carers to ensure they are able to offer the best possible standard of care in line with the National Minimum Standards and best practice.
- To ensure carers are provided with high quality training and supervision to enable them to meet the complex needs of our children and young people whilst in their care and beyond.
- To provide a diverse range of support services to foster carers to enhance their skills, resilience and experience of fostering for North Somerset.
- To provide a highly skilled and trained Fostering Service able to deliver best practice.
- To develop carers' skills in working with birth families and supporting contact arrangements in line with the care plans and best interests of the children and young people in placement.
- To ensure Family Link Carers can provide the same high standards of care through careful matching and ongoing training, support and supervision provided by skilled Supervising Social Workers who have close links to the Disabled Children's Team.

The Fostering Support Team's objectives for the period 2016 – 2018 are as follows:

- To develop a pool of carers who can meet the needs of children coming into Local Authority care on an emergency basis, who have the skills and experience to meet their needs and can support moving them on in a planned way.
- Review of remuneration package, payment for skills and the current specialist scheme.
- Explore reinstating 24 hour support to foster carers and the foster carers' counselling service
- Impact analysis / business case to be completed to increase capacity as the fostering service grows
- To update and modernise current fostering procedures in line with best practice
- To develop systems for data monitoring and compliance in line with the team plan outlined below

- To continue to deliver a range of support services including targeted support groups, training, specialist support via CONSULT, group work and to keep carers informed and celebrate achievements and success.

Performance targets for the supervision and support of foster carers

- All foster carers will have an allocated Supervising Social Worker trained in the 'Secure Base Model'
- All foster carers will have 3 yearly DBS checks and medical reviews
- All foster carers will be subject to an annual review of approval (not more than 12 months since the previous review) which will be presented to the Fostering Panel as a minimum every 3 years minimum or more frequently if deemed necessary by the fostering service.
- All foster carers to have at least one annual unannounced visit, not more than 12 months apart.
- In addition to support visits, foster carers will have formal supervision with their Supervising Social Worker at intervals of no more than 8 weeks.
- All foster carers will have completed their Training Support and Development Standards within 12 months of their approval (18 months for kinship carers)
- All foster carers will have a training and development plan as part of their annual review which includes mandatory training as well as courses targeted to meet their individual needs and guidance around wider learning and development opportunities
- All carers will undertake 3 yearly updates to their Child Protection Training, safer caring and Paediatric First Aid Training
- All foster carers will have a signed Foster Carers Agreement and Supervision Agreement and will have access to the Foster Carers' Handbook, Secure Base Model guidance and Safer Care Policy
- All carers to have a Safe Care Agreement on file that is reviewed as part of the annual review and in line with each new placement made.

The above is in accordance with the Fostering National Minimum Standards

Strategic Objectives

Expectations and Supervision of Foster Carers

- Review and develop the Foster Carer Agreement and Finance Policy
- Update Fostering Service policies and ensure these are accessible publically.
- Update handbook with revised policies, including ability to access on-line
- Review and develop supervision model to make it more consistent across the service and to include the application of the 'Secure Base' model
- Review with each carer, the supervision by their SSW, as some carers may be able to go for longer between visits (e.g. if long term or respite placements) thus freeing up SSW time for other support activities. The Fostering Service will ensure that as a minimum foster carers receive formal supervision on a 8 weekly basis with monthly contact in between to ensure appropriate support is in place.
- Capture data about why carers leave North Somerset through de-registration reports and by setting up exit interviews with those who leave where appropriate

- Work towards decreasing the number of foster carers who get de-registered each year as a result of the service they have been provided with by North Somerset
- Continue to develop the processes for managing allegations and complaints against carers
- Develop partnership working between foster carers and the Fostering Team
- Involve carers in the retention, support and training of foster carers, including in the Foster Carer Forum and carers being part of working groups
- Ensure that all foster carers' approvals are reviewed on an annual basis via the annual review process, with every 3rd review being presented to the Fostering Panel.
- Ensure that all foster carers receive at least one unannounced visit during each review period and that these visits are not more than 12 months apart

Training and Support for Foster Carers:-

- Review and agree the mandatory training for registration as a foster carer, within the first year and across each skill level
- Analyse the quality of the training courses based on foster carer feedback
- Review the Foster Carer Training Program to further incorporate therapeutic parenting, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), including the PACE model, and develop more specialist training for foster carers to care for more complex children such as Non Violent Resistance (NVR).
- To further embed the Secure Base Model within the supervision of foster carers and within their parenting style
- Seek feedback from carer's about the range, and gaps in, the training program, and match the training to the needs of the children
- Develop other support and learning opportunities e.g. Support Groups
- Develop work with other departments or agencies e.g. YES Service and Weston College to accredit courses and expand access to relevant training
- Consider the support needs of children of foster carers, and address some of these needs through a regular program. There are higher numbers of older carer children, and at present they are under-represented in these groups, so their needs should be addressed.
- Some adult children of carers may be able to attend training or carer support groups to help their role with the children who are looked after in their families
- We will explore the development of a support group for the children of foster carers, based on organised positive activities
- Develop the range of support groups available so that as many carers as possible can access this form of support
- Refine the processes for foster carer reviews, including changing the format of forms and improving the quality and quantity of feedback from Child Care Social Workers, children placed with carers and carers own children. We will consider adopting the established Coram BAAF suite of paperwork to help with this task

- Develop a mentoring scheme within the Fostering Service
- For those children who have complex needs, carers may need packages of support which include regular respite arrangements
- Continue to develop the Placement Support Meetings to support placements where there are concerns about placement stability
- Where appropriate, hold Placement Ending Meetings to review what went well and what concerns there might have been so that issues can be taken forward for future placements or to the carer review
- Develop use of social media and on-line methods to support carers and the children they look after

Development of Practice and Service

- Ensure staff are kept up to date with current guidance and practice to support foster carers and develop the Fostering Service e.g. through workshop sessions.
- Developing particular aspects of the service with staff accessing external training e.g. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and engaging in research through The Fostering Network, or learning sessions for staff about topics or developing processes
- Work closely with CONSULT to help apply learning to the work with carers to meet children's needs
- Develop Parent and Child, Youth Justice and single placements as part of the Specialist Placement Scheme.
- Share successes and acknowledge achievements of children and carers e.g. annual carer awards
- Develop program of group work with carers and children who are looked after by training up workers and developing the program based on the identified needs of children
- Develop the Ambassador Group to get carers engaged in improving the retention and support of carers

Targets for the development of the support service

- To review all Support Groups with a view to increasing attendance and ensuring these are in line with the needs of the foster carers and children they care for. To develop an additional support group for Family Link carers
- To deliver a group work programme to support Children Looked After, enhancing placement stability
- Explore the option of the implementation of a 24 hour support phone line for foster carers.
- Peer support for carers to be reviewed and consideration to be given to Buddying / Mentoring Schemes
- Foster Carers' Counselling Service to be recommissioned
- Foster Carers' Newsletter to be reviewed with the graphics / communications team to maximise impact
- To work closely with North Somerset Foster Carers' Association and the Ambassadors' Group to improve foster carer involvement in service development.

- To monitor the use of the new North Somerset Fostering Website, including the members' only section and ensure it is an effective resource for carers in respect of guidance, advice and information
- To continue to develop our social media presence as a tool for retention and support as well as recruitment
- To provide specialist support from our CONSULT Service to support carers in meeting the needs of children whose mental health or emotional wellbeing has been affected by a difficult early history and complex family relationships
- To deliver a specific focus on placement stability by embedding models such as Secure Base and Signs of Safety and exploring approaches such as NVR (Non Violent Resistance) and DDP (Dyadic Developmental Practice)
- To work with the learning and development service to develop and deliver a training programme that meets the needs of foster carers and promotes best practice and continual learning
- To review payment for skills and the Specialist Foster Carer Scheme
- To develop a service that meets the needs of children coming into care in an emergency with a pool of carers that are skilled in supporting children during this period and a system that minimises disruption and multiple placement moves
- Develop systems for permanency planning in line with the wider service objectives
- To recognise and celebrate the achievements of our foster carers, their families and the children and young people in placement
- To develop a clear set of fostering procedures
- To ensure all carers have an up to date profile
- To roll out foster carer ID badges for all carers
- Continue to develop working relationships with other parts of the organisation, to ensure the most effective communication strategy across the service

Planning and Strategy

In line with the above aims and objectives a team plan has been developed setting out clear targets for both the development of the support service and specific performance management.

The North Somerset 2016-18 Fostering Strategy has been based on the team plan and an analysis of the data provided within this document. The underpinning feature of our strategy are the views of our Children Looked After and our foster carers which is fundamental to our service design and the success of the 2 year strategic plan moving forward.

